

## THE PATTERNS OF LOVE IN CARSON McCULLERS' FICTION

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In the preface to her play *The square root of wonderful* Carson McCullers wrote: "I suppose my central theme is the theme of spiritual alienation" (Schorer 1973 : 85). Oliver Evans, who has most extensively written about her works, called *The heart is a lonely hunter* "probably the most elaborate treatment in American literature of the theme of spiritual isolation" (Evans 1965 : 58).

The people Carson McCullers writes about look for something outside themselves with which they could identify. One of the most important ways of escaping loneliness is love, which is, however, never quite successful. In her manifesto on love Carson McCullers writes:

First of all love is a joint experience between two persons — but the fact that it is a joint experience does not mean that it is a similar experience to the two people involved. There are the lover and the beloved, but these two come from different countries. Often the beloved is only a stimulus for all the stored-up love which has lain quiet within the lover for a long time hitherto. And somehow every lover knows this. He feels in his soul that his love is a solitary thing. He comes to know a new, strange loneliness and it is this knowledge which makes him suffer... Let it be added that this lover about whom we speak need not necessarily be a young man saving for a wedding ring — this lover can be man, woman, child, or indeed any human creature on this earth.

Now, the beloved can also be of any description. The most outlandish people can be the stimulus for love (McCullers 1969a : 26).

The division into the lover and the beloved can be seen in all of Carson McCullers' works. Both the lover and the beloved may be incredibly odd. But besides illustrating that anyone can be subject to love, the use of abnormal characters also has a symbolic function. The physical defectiveness

of the characters is a symbol of spiritual imperfection which causes their loneliness. Through love they want to make their personalities more complete and to do away with this imperfection.

As Carson McCullers says about *Reflections in a golden eye* "the fact that Captain Penderton ... is homosexual, is a symbol, of handicap and impotence" (McCullers 1971 : 276). His physical infertility is indicative of a spiritual unproductivity and deadness. In a simplified manner his loneliness and frustration can be reduced to the inability to come to terms with the living and the natural. He tries to lose himself in his work but he achieves only a mechanical knowledge of many facts: "The Captain never in his life had had an idea in his head. For the formation of an idea involves the fusion of two or more known facts. And this the Captain had not the courage to do" (McCullers 1941 : 42).

The mechanical in Captain Penderton is contrasted with the natural in other characters. One of these is the soldier with whom the Captain becomes preoccupied, another is the horse, Firebird. The two forces come to open conflict in Captain Penderton's ride on Firebird. The scene is symbolic. By trying to master the horse Captain Penderton wants to convince himself that he can also master life. His failure to do so is a blow pushing him even deeper into his complex of not being able to come to terms with life. Humiliated that the soldier has seen him in his greatest moment of weakness the Captain finds an outlet for all his frustration in a mixture of love and hate for Private Williams. He wants both to master and to identify with the natural symbolized by the soldier and thus to perfect the most incomplete part of his nature. But because of the way he goes about it he is doomed to failure from the very beginning. Since his love is homosexual, it is by definition infertile and unnatural. The only way in which Captain Penderton does finally relate to his beloved is again through the mechanical embodied in the pistol with which he shoots the soldier.

Captain Penderton falls in love with someone who has all the traits which he himself lacks. Most of the characters try to relieve their loneliness by choosing a beloved who is in some way worse off than they are. In that respect they are like the romantic chivalric knights, who always helped the weak and the oppressed. Even the Captain wants to identify with a person who is both socially and intellectually his inferior.

In *The heart is a lonely hunter*, as in other of Carson McCullers' fiction, the characters seek the most isolated individual in order to relieve their own, lesser loneliness. Mick, Blount, Biff and Doctor Copeland fall in love with Singer, who, being a deaf-mute is most isolated himself, and Singer falls in love with another deaf-mute who is moreover a moron. The love of Miss Amelia for the hunchback is another example illustrating this thesis. Cousin Lymon is one of the most freaky characters in McCullers' fiction.

He was scarcely more than four feet tall and he wore a ragged, dusty coat that reached only to his knees. His crooked little legs seemed too thin to carry the weight of his great warped chest and the hump that sat on his shoulders. He had a very large head, with deep-set blue eyes and a sharp little mouth. (McCullers 1969a: 6-7).

Miss Amelia is a freak herself. Unusually tall and manly, she also has

"a face like the terrible dim faces known in dreams — sexless and white, with two gray crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief" (McCullers 1968a: 4).

By loving an even greater freak she can forget her own deformities. Alison Langdon also finds relief in the love of people who are worse off than she is. Herself forever ailing, she dearly loved her little daughter who had been weak and ill all the eleven months of her life. The child was not quite normal, either, because its index and third fingers were grown together. After its death her only comfort was the little Philippino houseboy, Anacleto. By taking care of him, Alison gained importance in her own eyes because she was helping someone even more dependent than she herself.

The way the characters tend to choose a beloved who is weaker than they are points to a relation between love and pity in McCullers' fiction. Oliver Evans suggests that this association is characteristic of the romantic concept of love (Evans 1965: 71). In discussing Singer he gives three other reasons for maintaining that Singer is a romantic lover. As he writes, "the fact that the object of his love is unworthy of it makes him not less typical but the more so, since idealization is the essence of romantic love" (Evans 1965: 45). Besides, "it is one of the characteristics of ideal romantic love, derived from Platonism, that it need not be reciprocal" (Evans 1965: 44). Finally, "suicide is not an uncommon outcome of romantic love" (Evans 1965: 44-45).

If these characteristics are discussed one by one it will become evident that Singer is not Carson McCullers' only romantic lover. Idealization is present in almost all the examples of love described in her fiction. Antonapulous is only the most obvious example, since he is so disgusting that Singer clearly sees in him something which is not really there. As Oliver Evans points out, McCullers implies in her fiction that "what men see in other men is not what is "really" there but what they wish to find. ... the more grotesque and repulsive a character who is yet able to inspire love in another, the more forcefully he illustrates this thesis" (Evans 1965: 41).

Antonapulous' stupidity is emphasized already on the first page of the book when his appearance is contrasted with Singer's. While Antonapulous' face "was round and oily with half-closed eyelids and lips that curved in a gentle, stupid smile" (McCullers 1970: 1), Singer's eyes "had a quick, intelligent expression. He was always immaculate and very soberly dressed" (McCullers 1970: 1). Even though Antonapulous is a moron, Singer ascribes a

superior knowledge to him and makes him his only confidant. Feverish with excitement during each of his visits at the asylum, he tells Antonapoulos things that the Greek could not possibly understand.

Singer idealizes Antonapoulos and he in turn is thought to be perfect by all the other characters in *The heart is a lonely hunter*. He is also a freak, but it is because of the peculiar nature of his abnormality that people are drawn to him.

The rich thought that he was rich and the poor considered him a poor man like themselves. And as there was no way to disprove these rumors they grew marvelous and very real. Each man described the mute as he wished him to be (McCullers 1970 : 180).

Irving Malin compares Singer to Moby Dick. "His muteness is "white"... Like Ahab the four characters take advantage of the blank tablet" (Malin 1962 : 22). Many critics think of Singer as a Christ figure. Oliver Evans more accurately maintains that religious symbolism in *The heart is a lonely hunter* cannot be denied, but that it is religious only in the sense that Singer is deified by others and Antonapoulos by him. (Evans 1965 : 42). In fact, Singer does not contribute anything tangible to anyone's life. Because he is silent, does not oppose them and is always eager to "listen" politely, the characters believe that he understands them.

Idealization is also present in *Reflections in a golden eye*. Alison is blind to the defects of her baby daughter. Captain Penderton, repelled by his wife, feels alone at home and idealizes the life of the enlisted men living together in the bare, masculine barracks. In *The member of the wedding*, Frankie Addams' love for her brother and his bride and her dream that after joining with them the whole world will open to her is obviously improbable and idealized. Her memory of her brother is very vague, since he has been away in the army and she hardly even knows the bride. But the thought that the two of them enjoy a perfect sort of togetherness excites her imagination and she also wants to become a member of their supposedly ideal relationship. Marvin Macy in *The ballad of the sad café* must have idealized Miss Amelia in order to fall in love with such an outlandish woman. When she herself falls in love she shares with Cousin Lymon her long-guarded wealth and tells him her greatest secrets although he is no more an ideal morally than he is physically. The hunchback, in turn, does not see the evil in Marvin Macy and does not hesitate to leave Miss Amelia's comfortable house with his beloved.

Oliver Evans' second reason for calling Singer a romantic lover — the fact that his love is not reciprocated — draws attention Carson McCuller's statement about love being "a solitary thing". It is good if the beloved is merely indifferent, because often he comes to hate his lover. As Carson McCullers writes:

The value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself. It is for this reason that most of us would rather love than be loved. And the curt

truth is that, in a deep and secret way, the state of being beloved is intolerable to many. The beloved fears and hates the lover, and with the best of reasons. For the lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved (McCullers 1969a : 27).

The principle of the beloved fearing and hating the lover is best illustrated in *The ballad of the sad café*. In most of the other works love is simply not reciprocated. Only Alison from *Reflections in a golden eye* can be said to hate her husband. It is her greatest dream to divorce and leave him but she is unable to do so because of her health. In *Clock without hands* Sherman does not really hate Jester, but he scorns him. Whenever he is in trouble he takes it out on Jester. When Jester tries to kiss him he gives him a blow. Malone is also repelled when his wife makes advances to him and he makes her stay away. Miss Amelia from *The ballad of the sad café* instinctively refuses to be the beloved by rejecting Marvin Macy. She shames before the whole town, takes away all his property and then forces him to leave. But she herself is not spared the suffering of having a loved one turn away when she falls in love with Cousin Lymon.

No matter how much the beloved hates him, the lover tries to ignore it. As Carson McCullers says, "the lover craves any possible relation with the beloved, even if this experience can cause him only pain" (McCullers 1969a : 27). This suffering is also typical of romantic love.

Each of the lovers in *The ballad of the sad café* suffers when the beloved turns against him. Marvin Macy signs over to Miss Amelia all of his worldly goods in order to win her love. But when he puts his hand on her shoulder and tries to tell her something, she hits his face so hard that the blow breaks one of his front teeth. After she turns him off the premises he sits in the window of her store one night and she sues him for trespassing. Finally he is forced to go away filled with a wild but vengeful love for her. When she becomes the rejected lover herself, Miss Amelia endures all the tricks Lymon plays on her. She does not oppose him even when he asks Marvin Macy to stay in her house, because

... she found herself in many pitiful positions. But still she did not put Marvin Macy off the premises, as she was afraid that she would be left alone. Once you have lived with another, it is a torture to have to live alone. The silence of a firelit room when suddenly the clock stops ticking, the nervous shadows in an empty house — it is better to take in your mortal enemy than face the terror of living alone (McCullers 1969a:60).

Cousin Lymon is not successful in winning Marvin's love, either. Macy beats him and calls him "Brokeback" (McCullers 1969a : 49) but Lymon is as if bewitched. He follows his beloved everywhere he goes, helps him to win the fight with Miss Amelia and finally decides to leave the town with him.

The third reason Oliver Evans calls Singer a romantic lover is that he commits suicide. In that respect Singer is unique in Carson McCullers' fiction.

Only Sherman's letting himself be bombed by one of the town's Negro-haters comes close to committing suicide. But very often love ends in some other form of violence. In *Reflections in a golden eye* Alison cuts off her nipples with garden shears and then Captain Penderton shoots the soldier. Frankie Adams in *The member of the wedding* steals her father's pistol and wants to kill herself, abandoning this idea only in favor of running away from home. Miss Amelia and Marvin Macy in *The ballad of the sad café* settle their affairs with a big fight. When Marvin and Cousin Lymon leave the town they destroy all they can of Miss Amelia's property and fix a dish of her favorite food seasoned with poison.

If the lover does not hurt himself, die, or even commit suicide, he is very miserable after the loss of his beloved. Miss Amelia, shut off from the world in her boarded-up house, leads an existence which is a sort of life-in-death. Berenice from *The member of the wedding* tries to reconstruct her great love for Ludie by marrying different men who in some way remind her of him. Each of these attempts is a failure and only amplifies her sense of loss. Only young people, who thanks to their youth are very resilient, successfully recover after the loss of a beloved.

It seems that there is one more characteristic connecting Carson McCullers' fiction with the romantic concept of love in addition to those pointed out by Oliver Evans. Like true romantic lovers, her characters seek a spiritual rather than a physical relationship with their beloved. It is only a spiritual union which can relieve their loneliness. There is no suggestion of sex in the relation of Singer and Antonapoulos or the other main characters of *The heart is a lonely hunter* and Singer. In *The ballad of the sad café* Carson McCullers is careful to rule out the possibility of a physical union between any of the characters. Alison and Anacleto from *Reflections in a golden eye* are not so much lovers as friends. They are both very much devoted to each other, and each is tolerant of the others' eccentricities. There is no sexual relationship between them. Anacleto is in fact a completely sexless figure, a sort of eunuch.

Sex in McCullers' fiction is not only of secondary importance. To many of her characters, as for example to Mick, Frankie and Miss Amelia, it is horrifying and disgusting. A great number of her characters are either homosexual or bisexual. It seems that Biff Brannon is her porte-parole when he thinks:

By nature all people are of both sexes. So that marriage and the bed is not all by any means. The proof? Real youth and old age. Because often old men's voices grow high and reedy and they take on a mincing walk. And old women sometimes grow fat and their voices get rough and deep and they grow dark little mustaches (McCullers 1970 : 112).

True, reciprocal love is a very rare phenomenon in Carson McCullers' fiction. In all of her major works there are only three examples of such a re-

lationship. The union of Leonora and Major Langdon, while satisfying to them, would be impossible for many of her other characters. It is a purely physical, animalistic love. Both the Major and Leonora are very sensual, passionately fond of riding and eating. Leonora likes to eat so much that once she talks in her sleep about stuffing and then eating a turkey. By writing that she is "a little feeble-minded" Carson McCullers implies that only stupid people can be satisfied with purely physical love. Of the two other examples of successful love, the relation between Portia and Highboy from *The heart is a lonely hunter* is only a minor affair. Berenice and Ludie in *The member of the wedding* enjoyed a most complete relationship. But even their love is short-lived because of Ludie's death.

Love is very difficult to find and even more difficult to keep. In her most beautiful short story "A Tree — a Rock — a Cloud", McCullers suggests that people should all the time make a conscious effort in order to learn to love. After the loss of a beloved wife an old man goes through a long period of searching and suffering until he discovers a "science of love". This is how he has developed his "science":

I meditated and I started very cautious. I would pick up something from the street and take it home with me. I bought a goldfish and I loved it. I graduated from one thing to another. Day by day I was getting this technique ... For six years now I have gone around by myself and built up my science. And I am a master. Son. I can love anything (McCullers 1969a:143).

The man's ultimate aim, for which he has been preparing himself many years, is to be able to love a woman again. But it is doubtful whether he will yet have the time or the opportunity to love a woman. It has taken him a long time to make his discovery and he is already sixty-three years old. His whole "science" is in a way a delusion, because it may never lead him to his aim. Besides, since the beloved usually turns against the lover in McCullers' fiction, the woman whom he would finally come to love could do the same. The only way out is to love the whole womankind. In stopping short of the Platonic-like ideal and concentrating on one woman only the old man is doomed to face disillusionment and suffering again.

But even if he never achieved his aim of loving a woman again the old man has found peace and happiness thanks to his "science". When he first told the newspaper boy that he loves him he "seemed suddenly very happy" (McCullers 1969a:147). In all of McCullers' fiction, love, even though it is subject to time, does bring a short period of happiness. The lover finds in his beloved a fulfilment of his own personality. As the old man says about the love for his wife: "There were these beautiful feelings and loose little pleasures inside me. And this woman was something like an assembly line for my soul. I run these little pieces of myself through her and I come out complete" (McCullers 1969a:

147). A spiritual love for another human being, no matter how ugly or stupid, is capable of freeing the individual from his isolation. Because of the freedom and the nobility that it gives, even if only for a short time, it is, as Mick would say, "some good". If a person idealizes his beloved, he will find in him all he needs, all that he wishes to find, and will be satisfied even if his love is not completely reciprocated.

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